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The Threat to International Security from Fragile and Failed States: Proliferation of Organised Crime

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Abstract Fragile states pose an international threat to criminal infiltration that occurs more easily than states with functioning governments and institutions. Fragile states, delegitimised by their own population, unable to provide for the needs of their citizens and maintain control over their territory, have a non-functioning government and many problems to which the legitimate state fails to respond. In such a scenario, they become a breeding ground for criminal organisations that, becoming increasingly powerful, radicalized, and transnational, replace the delegitimised state. Criminal actors find in these states safe havens where they can act for their own interests, and where the proliferation of organised crime feeds on the problems and fragilities of institutions, making them also capable of providing solutions to the population for those problems to which the government has been unable to find solutions.

Keywords fragile states, transnational organized crime, global security, Latin America

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Introduction to the Correlation Between Transnational Crime and Fragile States

In a globalised, interconnected, and complex context such as the world currently offers us, crime has also evolved accordingly, taking on different forms from those traditionally analysed. Crime, and organised crime in particular, has evolved over the years in connection with various changes, taking the form of transnational crime. In the global scenario, many areas are characterised by political and economic instability, poverty, and different social problems that have made these areas fragile and prey to increasingly strong criminal actors. Criminal groups have been able to exploit the weaknesses of state institutions to penetrate and take control of the territory, having failed to find a strong contrast with a government that has been delegitimised by the population and is now unable to maintain control over its territory. In this way, various studies and statistics show how states characterised by instability and political fragility are easily 'captured' by organised criminal groups that make them a hub for their trafficking and act undisturbed, in addition to the fact that the population has often found and still finds a solution in organised crime, rather than a problem. Where the state does not guarantee services to its citizens and does not provide solutions to problems, organised crime takes over. A very strong example of this is still the case in some areas of Latin America, such as Mexico or, more recently, Ecuador, where profitable activities such as drug trafficking are at the center of the population's life and where the inefficiency of the state has allowed a strong resilience of the drug cartels that continue to hold sway over lawful state institutions.

According to the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 83 percent of the world's population lives in areas with high criminal activity, and the areas characterized by violence, poverty or delegitimized government are the major threats for the proliferation of criminal groups (Loicano, 2025). Criminal networks are evolving into autonomous and adaptable ecosystems that challenge efforts by governments to curb their influence, and experts warn that the adaptability of these illicit networks, which advance at high speed compared to the work of governments, makes them extremely difficult to combat effectively (Frattini & Tartaglia, 2018). We are faced with strong and adaptable organizations that can find the right opportunities for profit from different work activities, and their adaptability and financial resources mean that finding solutions to stop them remains a significant challenge (Council of Europe, 2014a).

Definitions of Fragile State and Failed State

Recent strategic documents drawn up by the United States, the European Union, and NATO highlight the threats posed to international security by what are referred to as 'fragile states' and 'failed states'. The threat linked to these types of states lies in the collapse of state structures that can be exploited by increasingly emerging actors, such as organised criminal groups or terrorist groups, capable of rapidly taking over areas without sovereignty, fueling unrest, instability and violence. The fragility of a state can be seen as a combination of economic, environmental, political, or social risks, together with an insufficient capacity of state institutions to absorb or mitigate these risks (Foradori & Giacomello, 2015a). State failure can roughly be seen as an aggravation of the pre-existing level of fragility, resulting in a state that is no longer able to perform the basic functions of a sovereign nation-state in the modern world system. The absence of legitimacy, the inability to guarantee basic services to citizens, such as acceptable living conditions or job opportunities, and the inability to enforce order and control its territory and borders are all among the fundamental elements that constitute the most common and widespread definition of state fragility. In historical terms, the notion of the 'fragile state' gained particular relevance in the post-Cold War period due to the growing instability following the collapse of the bipolar system; this growing instability is inevitably related to phenomena, also growing in the same period, such as demographic pressure, civil wars, and transnational crime. But it was mainly the so-called 'war on terrorism' that placed failed states at the center of the political agenda as possible havens for terrorist organisations and military and other threats (Foradori & Giacomello, 2015b). Although there is no shared and homogeneous definition of a fragile state in the current literature, there are several elements in common which different perspectives share and which emerge from definitions that we have from various international experts: according to the definition given by OECD-DAC, states are considered fragile when their structures are unable to provide functions aimed at reducing poverty, promoting development and guaranteeing the security and human rights of the population. This definition, considered stringent and demanding concerning the basic functions of the state, already allows us to explore a field of characteristics that are widely shared (The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development – Development Assistance Committee [OECD- DAC], 2022).

States are fragile politically, socially, and economically, and as a consequence of such scenarios, there is an internal context in which the citizenry is tested, given the lack of provision of essential services, and characterised by strong

discontent among the population that often erupts into violent riots. Incidents that, moreover, delegitimize the state in the eyes of the international community.

From an historical point of view, there has been an evolution of the concept of a "failed state" which passes through four phases:

-The first historical stage of the development of the concept can be located since 1960, when we still talk about the concept of "quasi-state"; the process of decolonization, especially in Africa, has given rise to numerous states recognized by the international community, without the political and economic foundations for development already being in place;

-the second stage arises in the post-war era, when the two super-powers ceased to be interested in providing military and political support to weak states. The process of globalisation has led to the disintegration of old states and the formation of new ones; states in decline caused regional conflicts and they became the target of numerous humanitarian operations and the target of operations for the maintenance of peace. In this context, the concept of "failed state" is born, but it is still in a localised dimension, in which these states are not interconnected with each other but only generate regional or local interest for neighbouring states;-in the third phase, towards the end of the 1990s, there was a shift to discussing the phenomenon as a threat to international peace and security; failed states became a variant of the new threats, among which drug trafficking has a prominent position;

-In the fourth and final phase, the concept of "failed state" undergoes a turning point after the attacks of 11 September 2001, becoming a central part of the fundamental concerns of the international system. After this date, the "failed states" have been considered as a germ for the development of transnational organized crime (Emmerich, 2019a).

So, after the attacks of 11 September 2001, they became a central issue of the international system. In summary, then, the fragile (and/or failed) state, characterised by the collapse of the core of government, violence, lack of law enforcement, and law and order bodies, is used for other purposes, such as becoming involved in drug trafficking or other illegal activities (Berdal, 2019), since it fails and cannot prevent any form of transnational organised crime. When the state does not work, or only works for a few, most begin to reject and delegitimise it: in such a situation, legitimacy is transferred to other non-state actors. The attention on this problem was also placed by the National Security Strategy, drawn up by the Bush administration in 2002, and by the European Union for Safety and Security of 2003 which have already pointed out that these states represent one of the main challenges to global security. The US National Security Strategy has begun to push forward the concern for "failed state" as a place of settlement for the development of international organized crime, also in relation to the danger of the so-called "rogue states" that can go to manipulate these states (Foradori & Giacomello, 2015c). These "failed states" provide convenient operating bases for international terrorists; transnational criminal organizations take advantage of these given their porous borders, their weak or non-existent law enforcement, and the inefficiency of judicial institutions. In this scenario, we have to consider the actors who have been able to exploit these fragilities mentioned above, starting with criminal groups.

Evolution of Organised Crime into a Transnational Phenomenon

Organised crime has had such an impact that it has become a reality in its own right and autonomous from other forms of delinquency, in addition to the fact that it has demonstrated how to compete with the legal system or join it by infiltrating it through parties, local administrations, the institutional apparatus, and the financial apparatus. An important definition of organised crime comes to us from the Palermo Convention, which describes it as a structured group lasting over a period of time, as a stable organisation of several members to commit multiple crimes and obtain material or economic advantages. But it is evident how, today, such definitions have to be taken into account with phenomena of global scope and in continuous change, despite the fact that the Palermo Convention still represents one of the most significant expressions of the transition from nation-state-tailored penal systems to a broad appreciation of the international dimension of the most serious forms of crime (Balsamo, Mattarella & Tartaglia, 2020a).

With globalisation and technological development, with the overcoming of internal borders and the birth of a single market that allows the interconnection of the various economic realities, criminal groups have inevitably taken on an international character. The globalisation of economic processes that has characterised the development of society in recent years is the result of the affirmation of a world market ideology (Merlati, 2015) that is based on the demolition of borders and the erasure of national geographical spaces. The free movement in the planetary territorial space of individuals and goods of production constitutes the indispensable prerequisite for the ideology of the world market (Centonze, 2008a); this freedom imposes the disavowal of the geographical barriers of the traditional state in favor of

a single global territorial space, within which companies and entrepreneurs operate. In such a perspective, a global market that disregards the geographic boundaries of traditional states can only entail an escape from the control of national sovereignty exercised by nations. In such a global village, in the words of McLuhan, organised crime has evolved accordingly, adapting to new needs and new scenarios, demonstrating a strong adaptability to the surrounding environment that has allowed it to progressively expand transnationally, knowing how to exploit the disharmony between the systems of the various states; national sovereignty is beginning to decline as traditional geographical boundaries are increasingly weakened and the centrality of the ideology based on the sovereignty of the nation-state is fading; the process of computerisation characteristic of the ideology of the global market has brought about a simplification and acceleration of the modes of communication within this global economic system, facilitating the exchange of goods and commodities of production and creating the space in which the global network of exchange between individuals on the planet is established: this thickening of international networks has created the basis for structuring criminal activities globally as well, capable of transcending national borders and identifying new routes and connections (Centonze, 2008b). Various geopolitical changes over the years, such as the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the redefinition of the borders of a large part of the Eastern European region, have brought internal conflicts and political instability, increasing mass migration flows that, together with the rapid growth in the volume of communications and information exchanges, have made it more applicable to structure transnational operational networks between organised criminal groups that, while maintaining a firm base in the territories of traditional influence, connect with other groups in order to divide labour and facilitate large-scale illicit activities. A list of events and changes that have been perceived as facilitating the spread of organised criminal groups from their countries of origin to the rest of the global system, according to the most accredited criminological approach, can be traced to a combination of three joint phenomena:

-a structural factor, constituted by the progressive crumbling of barriers with the related framework of 'free movement' on everything;

-a historical-political factor, stemming from decolonization and the end of the Cold War, which led to the multiplication of states with fragile political and institutional profiles;

-an economic-social factor, deriving from the globalization of markets and the relative growth of inequality between social classes, which has become fertile ground for the development of organised criminal groups precisely because of poverty and the uneven distribution of resources (Balsamo, Mattarella & Tartaglia, 2020b).

It is in this context, therefore, that the term 'transnational organised crime' was born, indicating the transnationalisation of the ways in which criminal groups carry out illicit trafficking, thanks to the concessions provided by communication exchanges and technologies, but also the growth in the volume and type of crimes that are committed on the territory of several states.

Fragile and Failed States as a Threat to Global Security

Transnational criminal organisations benefit from weak states because in such unstable environments, lacking government control and with popular discontent, organised crime finds the right roots to establish itself. Criminal organisations have become increasingly powerful, have demonstrated strong adaptability to their surroundings, and have proven themselves capable of infiltrating all fields, from the political to the economic, and with fragile state structures, it is even easier. In light of these considerations, it is evident how the link between fragile state powers and the spread of conflictual phenomena proves to be a crucial fact in the contemporary study of international relations; the processes of globalisation, moreover, have broadened the perspective on the subject along with the consequences it has brought with it in various aspects of modern everyday life, including crime. Indeed, new pressures stemming from transnational phenomena have helped to create fertile ground for the fragmentation of state capacities and the eruption of conflict: the collapse of the state and central government is being replaced by new sub-state actors on the scene. Attention must then be paid to the degree of influence of criminal actors within a fragile state.

Criminal organisations exploit the increasingly weak economies of fragile states and institutional weaknesses to assume a position of control. This is also thanks to growing liquidity and to the fact that fragile states are no longer able to effectively counter the threat: we can see how fragility becomes a factor of attraction for criminal groups, which establish themselves in unstable and poorly controlled territories to take advantage of them and assume control (Council of Europe, 2014b). The phenomenon of the transnationality of crime is increasingly widespread, particularly in the case of drug trafficking: this, considered to be the most flourishing form of profit for organisations and which has allowed the exponential growth of the criminal organisations operating, has an impact on many sectors within

states, such as the judiciary, territorial control, organised crime or the illegal economy, fraud and tax evasion, finding fertile ground precisely in fragile or failed territories that become strategic thanks to the new cocaine trafficking routes. Two points of view must therefore be analysed to answer the question of the link between (transnational) organised crime, drug trafficking, fragile states, and geopolitical instability. The two points of view to be analysed are that of state capture and that of patronage mechanisms. According to the first perspective, many fragile states have proved particularly vulnerable to 'capture' by external criminal actors who have developed new trafficking while posing a serious threat to the internal security of the state itself and to global security. According to another perspective, rather than focusing on state capture, one should focus on the relationship between criminal elites and criminal networks, highlighting the centrality of 'patronage' mechanisms. This is the perspective that would make it possible to explain how contexts that today are characterised by widespread violence have had years of relative calm precisely thanks to the relationship between criminal and state actors, for example in Mexico (Salamanca, Jorge & Salcedo, 2012a).

What we have to specify, however, is that with the evolution of organised crime, the factor of poverty and low income has been partly overcome, as modern forms of crime have proven to have infiltrated even middle- and high-income countries and regions. This change is explained by the involvement of new actors on the stage and the new interests of organised crime groups compared to traditional ones, as we will see shortly when discussing current crime. Despite this, state weaknesses continue to be a fertilizer for the proliferation of organised crime.

The Failed State and Crime: The Case Example of Latin America

The development and rooting of criminal organisations are inextricably linked to the historical, political, economic and social dynamics that develop in the territories in which they operate and interact. From this perspective, the stages through which criminal organisations evolve reflect those inherent to the process of political construction of the rule of law, as well as the cycles of economic and social development of the territories of which they are part.

In Latin America, we are familiar with the concept of fragile states: the rise of criminal activities, particularly drug trafficking, is one of the forms adopted by such states. From the point of view of historical construction, Latin America has undergone enormous changes over the last fifty years, and in the 1990s it underwent profound structural reforms in a process in which economic growth was accompanied by a series of political, institutional and social processes. It is true that in those years the situation initially seemed positive; civil-military relations were consolidated in a democratic context, leading to a low probability of wars at a regional level, to the point of defining Latin America as a 'blue zone' with little possibility of military conflicts. We can define this as a kind of short-term hope (Emmerich, 2019b). The transition that took place, from an essentially authoritarian administration of power, where the control of the territory and its dynamics was the result of the use of instruments of coercion by the representatives of the institutions, to democratic systems in which the local political leadership was accountable to the electorate but also to the law, further increased those pre-existing structural imbalances and amplified the effects of recurring economic crises. Such are the basic conditions in which new criminal organisations can be born and developed. What has happened, then, is that while the conditions of democratic consolidation, economic openness, and globalisation have laid the material foundations for growth, there has been, at the same time, a deterioration in the security standards of the population: the possibility of war between states has been reduced, but internal violence between individuals has increased. Crimes began to be perceived as a public problem requiring state intervention; but the state, overwhelmed by the quantitative explosion of crime and violence, was unable to fulfill the protection of citizens under its jurisdiction: the rise in crime leads directly to the question of the crisis of the modern state in the region (Emmerich, 2019c).

The recourse to violence by various criminal actors is made possible precisely by the weakness of democratic institutions, which are incapable of securing a monopoly on violence for the sole purpose of guaranteeing security and administering justice. In the absence of state action, justice and security are therefore administered by the strongest actor through the use of private violence. The lack of state capacity lays the foundation for inequality in the distribution of the law and, consequently, for a real absence of the state in large areas of the big cities: the failure stems from within a fragmented society. In urban ghettos of poverty, value and belief systems are created that differ from the rest of society and in which the population finds in drug trafficking a new para-state institutional presence, with the serious political consequences that this entails. And if the existence of the rule of law and the exercise of monopoly over the means of violence are indispensable institutional conditions in the exercise of democracy, it is clear that democracy has not been able to exercise these 'powers'. In Argentina, political democratization has demarcated the conformation of a failed state, incapable of guaranteeing the effectiveness of its laws and policies throughout its territory, highlighting the institutional weaknesses existing in its security system and the shortcomings stemming from the disengagement of government legislators and law enforcement agencies. On the contrary, a self-financing circuit has been established

with the police generated by a series of gifts and funds from various criminal activities permitted, protected, or carried out by police officers themselves. In this public security scenario, some areas of the Latin American macro-region maintain semi-failed states that possess precisely some of the recurring characteristics of recent decades: the government's unwillingness to address criminal issues, the permanent delegation of public security to self-regulating police forces, the government's systematic ignorance, the inability to devise public security reform strategies, and a division of labour between those who commit violence and those who protect against violence, where each chooses the most profitable activity (Salamanca, Jorge & Salcedo, 2012b).

But another important theme according to the previous paragraph is the financial crime theme (we talk about Latin America): the Global Organized Crime Index of 2023 reports how financial crimes are a major issue in these areas, affecting state institutions, private companies, and citizens. State institutions are involved (probably) in financial crimes such as tax evasion, which is associated with the embezzlement of hydrocarbon exports and/or imports. Private companies are often victims of fraud and corruption, resulting in significant financial losses. Allegations of corrupt practices related to public contract appointments exist at both the federal and local government levels, elevating the risk of embezzlement and other financial crimes.

So, what experience and statistical data show us is that although organised crime has changed in some respects, the idea that fragile areas allow for easier criminal infiltration of the state remains confirmed.

In Colombia, in January of this year, war broke out in Catatumbo between dissidents of the 33rd Front of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and guerrilla insurgents from the National Liberation Army (ELN), driven by fierce contestation over control of criminal economies, particularly the cocaine market. According to the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, the fighting has so far claimed more than 56 lives and displaced over 54,000 people. The violence and the humanitarian crisis underscore the gravity of the situation in Colombia and its broader implications for peace in a country just characterized by armed conflict. This background illustrates how the conflict in rural areas has changed, with armed actors no longer directly challenging the state but seeking to dominate local criminal economies through increasingly violent strategies against rival factions and civilians. Catatumbo is a region with lots of natural resources such as oil, coal and uranium, and its strategic location, its weak border controls and limited state presence, have made it an area very important for coca cultivation. The Colombian state has lost legitimacy in the region due to its inability to curb the violence and the government’s strategy has been to deploy the military in response to public order crises, without a long-term plan to strengthen its security presence in the region or bring stability in the form of social infrastructure. As a result, Catatumbo suffers from inadequate public infrastructure and high levels of poverty. These conditions have enabled armed groups to gain a foothold in the region, where they wage violent territorial battles over control of coca plantations and illegal mining operations. Against this, we can extract further confirmation that changing criminal markets are accompanied by a constant risk due to the problems of the state (Rios & Aponte, 2025).

Which are the actors involved?

We have shown that with an inefficient state, some non-state actors who have become increasingly powerful have been able to take advantage of state problems. An example that we have to mention is that of mafia organizations, which evolved to the point where today we speak of "business mafia" and "mafia enterprises". The term shows how these criminal organizations evolved into entrepreneurial structures, abandoning the path of violence and extortion in favor of mutually advantageous relations, financial collaborations and illicit transactions with professionals in the economy. The ability to create a system of relationships and links of mutual convenience with politics, economics, and institutions, allowed this kind of criminal organizations to coexist and relate with pieces of the ruling and productive class of the various social contexts, and where the components are always interested in defending their economic interests, even at the cost of becoming accomplices of abuse and violence and remaining apparently neutral in the face of the prevarication of laws and rights. The economic power driving illicit activities relies on modes of cooperation and exchange to gain advantages in exchange for protection. Remaining on the line drawn by the example of mafia organisations, the discussion can be broadened with regard to the importance that non-state actors have acquired in recent years: if criminal organisations have evolved as reported above, it is clear that all those actors who have allowed these new relationships of mutual benefit to develop and all those professionals who have agreed to collaborate with such organisations should be taken into account. It is enough to think of bankers, lawyers, accountants, and actors who have lent themselves and still lend themselves to collaborations with criminal groups: when we speak about relationships, exchanges, and collaborations, the parties involved are always multiple; therefore, they all fall within the discourse of aiding the development of (transnational) organised crime. We have to say that these business relations

create a series of illicit operations of a 'quieter' nature than traditional violent operations, making them more difficult to detect. But the point that should be given more thought is why certain actors prefer the illegal route and why legality fails to be more satisfying than what is offered by entrepreneurial crime.

The network of actors involved, however, does not end there: every market involved in illicit activities involves several facilitating actors. Taking South America as an example, drug trafficking includes many actors for each market involved (production, transport, consumption). In Colombia, the illicit economy is the basis for the operations of a myriad of criminal actors, many of whom have emerged from old armed political systems: as also confirmed by the UNODC in its Global Report on Cocaine 2023, the demobilization of the FARC has led to a larger number of different dissident groups vying for control of the cocaine supply chain, and this complex set of armed non-state actors includes FARC dissidents, insurgents, drug trafficking groups and numerous small criminal groups controlling cocaine production and trafficking in different areas of the country (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC],2023).

This example is just one of many criminal markets involving a range of increasingly global non-state actors, whether South American drug cartels, mafia organisations, or criminal groups oriented towards economic power and territorial control. Organised crime involves too many actors to be studied without a multilateral and holistic approach (Musacchio, 2022).

New relationships and infiltrations: the crucial role of actors

The evolution of organised crime, which has also entailed a series of changes in the various global criminal markets and their related routes (suffice it to say that concerning drug trafficking, the global north has also become a key route), is an evolution that has concerned its internal characteristics, its modus operandi and the various relationships it establishes with different actors. The characteristics of modern organised crime certainly include an organisational set-up based on stable resources, a quest for profit that almost acts as a collective identity, and the provision of protection, order, and security. Adaptation to the socio-economic fabric of reference is now an obvious capacity, and the financial power they have is such that it influences the entire economic structure: criminal organisations thrive thanks to the involvement of professional figures, legal experts, and businessmen, new players increasingly present on the scene who become facilitators for the development of new forms of organised crime, and who enable criminal networks to permeate new areas of illicit activity (Giaconi, 2001 as cited in Gagliano, 2020). The elements to be considered speaking of new non-state actors facilitating the development of new organised crime and deriving economic benefits from it are the elements of infiltration and facilitation. Organised crime influences public works, infrastructures, competition, and the supply of goods and services, but it is obvious that for this success, all the actors involved allow this penetration, receiving economic advantage, security and protection in return, and configuring crimes of corruption, money laundering, aiding and abetting. In the past, organised crime imposed itself mainly through violence, whereas today it integrates itself into society by bribing and having relations of collaboration and exchange with professional non-state actors: (transnational) organised crime is economically powerful, it has a good military corps, but above all, it has several contacts with politics, public administration, and finance. It is necessary, at this point, to clarify how organised crime influences the economy and politics, but at the same time how actors from finance and politics influence the development of crime; if we think organized crime with an holistic idea, we have to keep in mind three interconnected elements that are:

-organised crime;

-legal economy and politics;

-public administration and professionals.

These three elements feed each other, they are linked by a circular relationship through infiltration, corruption, and money laundering. Regarding money laundering, this is now central to all new partnerships: large profits need to be covered up, money from the criminal market needs to be 'cleaned up' and then incorporated into the legal market, and this masking of illicit money takes place through a cross between money from illegal trafficking and clean money from legal financial circuits. It is a process aimed at transforming an input, identifiable in illicit wealth, into an output: cleaned wealth.

Drug trafficking, for example, is among the most lucrative illicit activities, and according to recent UNODC estimates, drug trafficking generated a turnover of $322 million, of which $38 million in the Mediterranean region, while according to the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, the illicit economy is valued at up to $10

trillion, and it rivals legitimate industries in scale, with cybercrime, counterfeiting, and human trafficking driving its growth (UNODC, 2023).

It is easy to understand how such a large amount of money must be inserted into economic circuits as quietly as possible, and for this to happen, actors such as bankers and financial professionals play a crucial role. The subject of money laundering would merit a more in-depth discussion in a separate forum. Therefore, remaining on the subject of the influence of non-state actors, it is very important to know the actors involved, the modus operandi of organised crime and the relationships of mutual benefit between criminal groups and professionals, companies, entrepreneurs, multinationals, and in general with actors involved in the various illicit markets, and to verify the involvement of all those actors who can increasingly favour the proliferation of crime in the socio-economic fabric of reference and who can benefit from collaborative relationships with the crime. This growing development and an increasing involvement of these non-state actors would create an increasingly solid basis for pushing organised crime into new forms and developments, while also considering the marked ability to adapt to their surroundings that they have demonstrated. What is important is the collaboration of several states towards a common goal and a strengthening of international legislation, with appropriate measures to deal with a phenomenon that is evolving very rapidly. New forms of crime require new responses.

Current Organised Crime

As can be seen from what has already been mentioned, organised crime has evolved in a globalised and increasingly interconnected world, becoming transnational, crossing borders, and increasingly able to infiltrate and control. Indices and statistics, in analyzing the correlation between crime and fragility, take into account two related concepts, namely resilience and organised crime. Resilience (of the state) represents the ability to resist and dismantle the activities of organised crime through political, economic, legal and social measures. Organised crime, on the other hand, refers to illicit activities conducted by groups or networks acting in concert, through acts of violence, corruption, or related activities, to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or material advantage. Such activities can be carried out either within a country or transnationally. Let us take as an example the Global Organised Crime Index 2023, an index that reports a broad set of data from which noteworthy themes arise, which serve to highlight the ubiquity of organised crime and shed light on crime numbers, the scale and relevance of criminal markets, and their levels of resilience. First, the widening gap between crime and resilience: almost 83% of the world's population lives in countries with high crime rates, compared to 79% in 2021. While global resilience has largely remained at 2020 levels, crime has continued to grow at a staggering rate in response to intensifying political, social, economic and security changes; the Index results show that countries classified as fully democratic continue to exhibit the highest levels of resilience to organised crime compared to authoritarian regimes. Good governance practices that are open, transparent, and law-abiding encourage active citizen engagement and lay the foundations on which to build state and non-state responses to criminal threats (Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime [GITOC], 2023).

Another cross-sectional theme concerns, instead, the conflict that increases the vulnerability to organized crime in the country. Conditions of conflict and fragility have long been reported as contributing factors to crime. The data from this interaction show that conflict zones are more vulnerable to organized crime, becoming fertile ground, as already mentioned, for the establishment of non-state actors in state control and monopoly. Analyses show that the more a country is affected by conflict, the greater the likelihood of reduced levels of resilience to organised crime. Weakened institutions, the breakdown of governance structures, law enforcement as a quasi-auxiliary, and limited access to services provide fertile ground for criminal groups that are proving to be excellent alternatives for the functioning of the state, even if unsuitable. The Russian invasion of Ukraine was certainly among the main sources of fracture in 2022, and, as a result, crime levels have increased significantly. But even worse, the effect of prolonged wars could be devastating for many, with repercussions ranging from increased poverty to unemployment and consequent vulnerability to exploitation.

Another theme is financial crime as the most pervasive criminal market. From fraud to embezzlement, crimes take many forms, allowing criminals to infiltrate the economic market and financial systems of a country. The sheer size of the types of crime included in the definition of financial crime affirms the ubiquity of this market. Although often considered "victimless", financial crimes are in many cases linked to violent crime and have the potential to significantly undermine social and economic structures. Today, with the rapid innovation of digital technologies, crimes can be committed quickly even at excessive distances in the world, highlighting the transnational impact of the market. Financial crime has almost outperformed human trafficking in percentage terms, showing itself as the most pervasive illicit economy in 2022. Another set of results that emerge from the index we are considering, but also from

other data, is the influence of criminal actors reinforced by the pandemic. The scale and breadth of these actors grew in 2022, and it is noteworthy that this increase has been consistently observed for almost all regions, with the only exception being Oceania. Corruption creates opportunities for illicit activities to flourish, as criminal groups are enabled to operate with reduced risk, while criminal infiltration undermines countries' ability to build resilience and shape effective policies to counter organised crime. Indeed, one of the strongest correlations found is between actors integrated in the state and overall resilience. As these actors become more important in a given sector, the levels of resilience decrease. Financial crime is particularly globalized, probably because of the many forms of crime that this market involves. It has been found to have a strong influence in almost 70% of UN member states. These percentages clearly show that financial crime is largely present globally, even at a level independent of resilience, economic status, development, or political stability (GITOC, 2020).

It is necessary to make a specification regarding the private actors. The private sector is often seen as a victim of organised crime, with criminal activities that harm, for example, businesses, because of the insecurity created by some crimes, such as extortion. Having said this, however, the private sector has also become a key facilitator of organised crime, bridging the gap between legal and illegal economies. Sectors such as construction, real estate and transport are particularly susceptible to the influence of organised crime. It is therefore essential to consider the involvement of these actors in order to achieve a global understanding of the criminal landscape.

Final Considerations. The Proliferation of Organized Crime

In light of what has been said so far, we can affirm with conviction that criminal organizations have evolved by adapting to their environment and have adapted themselves by responding to the social, political, and economic needs of the territories in which they operate. In fragile contexts, criminal actors find room for infiltration and possibilities of response to a population dissatisfied and disappointed by state institutions. The evidence shows that the business-criminal threat related to the actions of individuals such as criminals, corrupt entrepreneurs and public officials, and professional facilitators, can implement considerable interference in the legal economic fabric, in an attempt to gain or maintain undue competitive advantage and tap substantial public funds. In this respect, there has been an increasing awareness of the vulnerability of the current national and international socio-economic context. The threat posed by economic activities that are highly lucrative from a criminal perspective, including corruption, tax evasion and avoidance, and possible fraud against the state or pollution of the economy through reinvestment of illicit capital, has led to an intelligence action aimed at identifying systemic vulnerabilities and possible phenomena of conditioning public decision-making mechanisms that can negatively affect the activities favored by these criminal organizations. Even if we refer to national interventions when we talk about counter-strategies, in the current context these must necessarily be analyzed taking into account the extraterritorial projections of organized crime, that they continue to pose a threat to national security in so far as the investments of illicit profits, relating to different types of trafficking, first and foremost drug trafficking in terms of profit, must necessarily be masked through various illicit transactions, being mixed with clean money and reinvested in seemingly legal activities, this issue, which has led to a growing attention to anti-money laundering operations. We are in the context of a crisis of national sovereignty, and the main issues that agitate the debate on the globalization of crime and the means to combat transnational organized crime cannot be addressed with a nationalistic approach. The "transnationality" constitutes, in the context that interests us in this examination, the peculiarity of contemporary organized crime, it was developed based on the phenomena of globalization and the dynamism of the subjects that give rise to the most complex criminal dynamics typical of the contemporary era. The globalization of crime and the explosion of transnational criminal phenomena are at the heart of international security issues, and this growing erosion of the spaces of national sovereignty accompanied by a crisis of state punitive power has put in crisis the traditional systems leading to the need to draw attention on the harmonization of the criminal legislations of the various countries for a common contrast, effective and international. The fight against transnational organised crime is a process that requires a broader approach than the fight against ordinary crime and necessarily requires a multidisciplinary and comprehensive approach. An approach that also takes into account the geopolitical and social aspects underlying states which more easily allow criminal proliferation. Also, at the level of prevention, it is necessary to rethink the policies of the states and the various needs of the population, going to act, directly or indirectly, on those issues that determine the fragility of the state and determine, Consequently, the seizure of territory by more powerful and more capable non-state actors.

Organised crime is changing and is evolving rapidly, using crisis and institutional weaknesses, or weak penal normatives that aren't efficient to contrast complex groups. International cooperation is needed, with more attention to the social problems that can favour criminal infiltrations and more attention to the evolution of the criminal markets

and their relative actors involved. Just a few weeks ago, a program on countering transnational organised crime concluded at the George C. Marshall Centre, where participants examined a range of illicit activities, from drug and human trafficking to cybercrime, financial fraud, and money laundering, highlighting the increasing sophistication of criminal enterprises and the crucial role of international cooperation in combating these threats. They reiterated how modern transnational criminal groups operate as autonomous and rapidly evolving ecosystems that challenge government efforts to curb their influence, as well as the issue of economic inequality that drives individuals towards illicit activities and strengthens criminal enterprises (Loicano, 2025).

We have a complex threat that is difficult to manage, it is a threat that evolves so fast that it is difficult to keep up with it. We need more instruments, and a multilateral approach is necessary: those who have to fight against this phenomenon have to be as fast as they are and go beyond the borders just like modern criminal organisations do.

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Sara Laddaga was born in Rome (Italy) in 1998, she studied first at the University of Perugia, and she graduated here in 2021, then she decided to continue her studies at the G. D'Annunzio University in Chieti to deepen her knowledge of crime from a socio-political perspective, where she graduated in 2024. She's continuing her studies in which she is dedicated to studying and analyzing crime, and she is especially passionate about the evolution of organised crime at an international level.

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